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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2076
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 6926
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 4959
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 4991
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 2694
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5679
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 6493
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 7762
RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 001560

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SUBJECT: DELHI DIARY, MAY 30-JUNE 6, 2008

REF: 07 CHENNAI 605

¶1. (U) Below is a compilation of political highlights from Embassy New Delhi for May 30-June 6, 2008 that did not feature in our other reporting, including:

-- MEA Chief of Mission Conference
-- Government Officials Retain Public Information
-- Karunanidhi Birthday Bash: Bashing the BJP
-- Pakistani Rockers Charm Kashmiris

MEA Chief of Mission Conference

¶2. (SBU) Media sources reported that External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee will convene India's first ever Chief of Missions Conference August 20-23 with all of India's approximately 150 envoys participating. The conference is expected to include a top-to-bottom policy review aimed at making Indian foreign policy more "proactive." Among the scenarios to be discussed will be India's prospective waiver from the Nuclear Suppliers' Group allowing it to conduct nuclear commerce. In addition, Indian media speculates that Mukherjee will begin assessing envoys as the potential successor to Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon, whose tenure ends in July 2009.

Government Officials Retain Public Information

¶3. (U) The media recently criticized the tendency of government to hide information from its citizenry by deploying the "national interest" argument. The 2005 Right to Information (RTI) Act gives the citizens of India access to records of the Central and State governments. During 2008, Rajasthan, Kerala and several other states have routinely invoked section 8 of the RTI act exempting government officials from releasing information in which "disclosure would prejudicially affect the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security, strategic, scientific or economic interests of the State." Comment: Media criticism of the government proclivity to use Section 8 of the RTI may result in a healthy debate over transparency in government.

¶4. (U) Tamil Nadu's ruling DMK party celebrated Chief Minister Karunanidhi's 85th birthday with the over-the-top extravagance that is typical of the DMK and opposition AIADMK's competing demonstrations of devotion to their leaders. The city found itself awash in a sea of Karunanidhi posters and DMK flags. One especially memorable poster showed the octogenarian Chief Minister smilingly laboring under the weight of what appeared to be a 50-pound flower garland. On the big day, the Chief Minister shuttled between the Chennai residences that house his two wives and the DMK's party headquarters, receiving numerous well-wishers from Tamil Nadu's elite. Thousands of doting DMK supporters came to greet the Chief Minister but they were kept at bay by the police. The DMK devotees showered Karunanidhi with an array of gifts, ranging from goats painted in the DMK's party colors, pigeons, fruit baskets, flowers, and, of course, money.

¶5. (U) Beyond the displays of adulation, the birthday celebrations had a serious political side. At the day's major public event, Karunanidhi exhorted India's secular parties to band together to thwart the "communal forces" of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), saying that "every citizen of the country has the responsibility to see" that BJP does not come to power in New Delhi. He was joined on stage by External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Prakash Karat of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and D. Raja of the Communist Party of India. Mukherjee read a letter from

NEW DELHI 00001560 002 OF 002

Congress President Sonia Gandhi which said the United Progressive Alliance had looked up to Karunanidhi as the coalition's "senior most leader for guidance, advice, and good governance." Karat praised Karunanidhi for his leadership against "the forces in the country that invoke religion" for everything. Karunanidhi used the occasion to emphasize his disappointment with the religiously motivated opposition that has stalled the Sethusamudram shipping canal project (Ref A). He hammered home the importance of the project using sound bites ("Sethu Ram will be my birthday gift") and symbolism (the stage set was designed with a ship motif).

¶6. (U) Comment: With the BJP forming it's first-ever government in next door Karnataka, the feisty Karunanidhi clearly relished baiting the BJP, which, according to conventional wisdom, remains on the margins in Tamil Nadu. But, one Delhi analyst assessed that for Karunanidhi to take aim so squarely at the BJP may be a signal that he fears BJP inroads into Tamil Nadu after its successful assault on Karnataka. With the DMK facing anti-incumbency, voter resentment over inflation, corruption, and the Karunanidhi family's dominance over DMK politics, taking shots at the BJP is an easy way to distract attention away the party's problems. Karunanidhi did not draw attention, of course, to the fact that not long ago his party was part of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government, and could once again be part of such a coalition if the bidding price is right.
End comment.

Pakistani Rockers Charm Kashmiris

¶7. (U) On May 25, Junoon, a popular Pakistani rock band performed on the banks of Dal Lake in Srinagar to an enthralled audience of about 4,000. The performance was organized by the South Asia Foundation (SAF), an NGO promoting regional cooperation in South Asia. The event was part of the festivities to inaugurate the Institute of Kashmir Studies at the University of Kashmir. The concert courted some political controversy. Critics such as Pakistan-based militant Syed Salahuddin had pressed Pakistan not to allow Junoon to perform in Srinagar, arguing that the

concert would send a signal to the international community that "Kashmir was an integral part of India." Despite the political overtones, the concert was incident free and the young crowd enjoyed the show.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: While not too much should be read into the performance, it is a positive sign. Kashmir will remain a flashpoint in Indo-Pak relations, but the concert represents another small step in a state that is moving steadily towards a new normalcy. End Comment.

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